

**Seasoned managers share their very best practices, practical tips and timeless insights on...**

## When given lemons, make...

By Mark Cutshall



**Phil Hudson**



**Herb Kolbe**



**Elisa Morgan**



**Bill Robinson**

### **Addressing the under-performing employee: Being straight up from the start**

What could be more unsettling than telling a high-ranking (and under-performing) employee that her services were no longer needed? Answer: Seeing the shock and dismay on her face as she says the unmet job expectations were never fully communicated to her, prior to being terminated.

**Herb Kolbe**, senior area director for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based Coalition for Christian Outreach, recalls that unenviable day when he made the dismissal and how the employee's legitimate surprise led to a redemptive lesson for the organization.

"For about a year I had tried to coach her to be more effective. Though she made progress in some areas, it was clear we needed to let her go. When she said, 'This is news to me,' I replied, 'It's been on the table for a long time.' Clearly, I had not been straightforward with her. While I had tried to encourage her all along, I hadn't really said, 'Here's what we expect of you; this is what needs to change if you want to stay in this position.'

"From this unfortunate experience, I gained two important takeaways. First, I've learned to be direct with employees, regardless of what motivates each individual. Some people thrive on direct feedback; others avoid it. Some are very self-aware of their job situation, others are not.

"Secondly, whenever I meet with an employee to track his or her performance, I send a follow-up email or letter that summarizes the key points of our conversation. This helps build under-

standing and clear communication.

"The bottom line is that no one should be surprised when they learn they're being terminated. Out of Christian integrity and the desire to give each person the best chance to succeed, we need to complement encouragement with straight-up honesty. An employee might be disappointed that he or she is being let go, but the news should never come out of the blue."

### **Building trust in your management team**

**Phil Hudson**, president/CEO, New Mission Systems International, recalls, "Almost two years ago, it became obvious to me that one of our senior managers, Jim (not his real name), was not the person for the job he was in. Yet, because we value the individual in our ministry, I took the responsibility and told him I had misplaced him in his role. "We want you on the bus," I told him. "I'll never move you from your position until you ask me to, because you're more important to us than us 'getting it right.'"

Ironically, at CMA Long Beach 2005, we both heard Ken Blanchard's talk on "Lead Like Jesus." Afterward, Jim told me, 'I just heard myself in Ken's message. Even though it scares me to death, I'm willing for you to move me wherever you want.' Jim's trust flowed from knowing I had his best interests at heart, even above fixing the problem.

"Today, he's a division head and doing great in his new position. He could have

had a bad attitude. He did not. The whole experience has reaffirmed to me that organizational charts aren't everything. Production isn't everything. Relationships are everything. It's all about respecting people as people with real needs, and valuing honesty, openness and vulnerability. People who under-perform need to know we value them and desire to help them get in a position that matches their ability. This is one function of leadership."

### **Looking in the mirror and learning from an honest mistake**

Sometimes, even the best, well-intended management plans can leave you in

*"The whole experience has reaffirmed to me that organizational charts aren't everything. Production isn't everything. Relationships are everything."*

the dust. So, how can you grow beyond an honest mistake? Just ask **Bill Robinson**, president of Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington.

"Eight or nine years ago, our enrollment dipped slightly in the freshman class. Since we didn't know if this was a blip or the beginning of a trend, we weren't very aggressive on salary increases for the next budget year. Come September, however, enrollment spiked upward and, fiscally, we were back on course. We actually had a surplus. The question arose, 'What should we do with the extra money?'

"I met with our VP for finance and our human resources director and we decided to give each of our employees a check for \$500. So, I asked, 'OK, what's

wrong with this idea?' We couldn't think of anything. Wary of proceeding without being challenged, I called a cabinet meeting and asked the same question, 'What's wrong with the \$500 idea?' Though there was a lot of discussion, no one could come up with an objection.

"I can still see the faces of our employees when we handed each of them a check. I told them not to thank us because we would have given them the money as salary increases had we not lost our nerve. But secretly, all of us in leadership were patting ourselves on the back. Then it hit us: We have a wonderful group of adjunct faculty, whom we totally left out.

"Our employees realized our intentions were good, yet the lesson was clear: Even our group of ten leaders had failed to see a major shortcoming in our idea.

"In hindsight, our sin was that we proceeded with an unchallenged plan, and that resulted in ignoring a very important group of employees. The whole experience caused us, as leaders, to ask why we

hadn't thought about them. Looking in the mirror is never easy. Yet, serving Christ and honoring others, we can do nothing less than to face our own shortcomings and learn from them."

### **How a little conversation goes a long way**

A bit of innovative forward thinking helped keep Denver-based MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International from tasting the bitter-sweet fruit of inaction. President/CEO **Elisa Morgan** tells the story: "In 1999, we were still a relatively young organization. We needed to transition from a hierarchical structure to a more participatory model. As we 'flattened out,' it was very important to listen to each other, so we developed an intentional gathering called "Take a read." Each month, four to six of our staff meet with me (or our COO on alternate months) to give their individual perspectives on what's working, what's not working, and suggestions for improving the organization. Over the course of a year, every staff member's

voice is heard.

"The biggest challenge for me is to remain quiet and try not to problem solve. This gives our staff the freedom to say what's on their minds, from 'Give us better training on how to be mindful of our ministry dollars,' to 'We need a volunteer coordinator.' Over the years, we've received a ton of practical suggestions that have furthered our ministry.

"Take a read' has deepened the trust between senior leadership and staff, and has reminded me that it's God who grows our organization. He is continually bringing MOPS to life by the ways we demonstrate greater stewardship, affirm each other's gifts, and commit to listen to everyone on our team."

*Each of these ministries has been a finalist in the Best Christian Places to Work annual survey: [bcwinstitute.com](http://bcwinstitute.com).*



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